

MICHAEL MORPURGO: DLITT

Mr Chancellor,

Storytelling lies at the heart of all great cultures. There is a golden thread that links the epic tales told by ancient bards to the classic folk and fairy tales which have been shaped and shared across many cultures. These tales, passed from generation to generation, often as bedtime stories, are associated with some of the happiest memories of childhood. They beguile and enthrall us; capture our imagination and transport us far, far away to other times and places. For this magical transformation to occur, three essential ingredients are required: a willing audience, a talented narrator, and most important of all, a wonderful and compelling story. Mr Michael Morpurgo, whom we are honouring today, is one of the finest storytellers of his generation.

Michael's early love of storytelling came from his mother who, as a professional actress, had the gift of reading "beautifully, powerfully, tenderly". Some of his happiest childhood memories are of her reading to him and his brother Pieter from the books that she herself loved, such as Aesop's Fables and Kipling's Just so Stories. Books were so integral to the Morpurgo household that as Michael wryly observes, "We didn't have walls in the house where I grew up, we had bookshelves. It was a house built of books."

Coming from a long line of poets, actors, and historians, a literary career was perhaps to be expected. However, Michael found that his early love of books was "all but entirely snuffed out" during his school years. He excelled at sport and for a time nurtured an ambition to play rugby for England. A natural leader, Michael became Captain of his School and when he enrolled at The Royal Military College, Sandhurst in 1962, seemed destined for a career in the military. But he concluded this was not to be his path in life and after studying

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for a degree at King's College London, decided to become a teacher. Here, whilst he chafed at the constraints of the educational system, Michael found that he had a way of communicating with children, particularly when he was telling them stories, "I could see there was magic in it for them, and realized there was magic in it for me."

Morpurgo's work has been recognised by many national and international literary awards, including the Whitbread Children's Book Award, the Prix Sorcières and the Smarties Book Award. He was honoured with an MBE in 1999, and received an OBE in 2006. In 2003, Michael Morpurgo became the third Children's Laureate, a scheme he helped establish with the late Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes and Newcastle University's Professor of Children's Literature, Kimberley Reynolds.

His books explore a wide range of topics and themes, ranging from historical events, natural history, the environment, adventure and family life. As University Librarian I'm delighted to find that one of his short stories includes a lady librarian who not only has, "a smiling face and a bright flowery scarf" but comes complete with her very own unicorn. I've got the smile and the scarf, but I don't think the library budget will stretch to a unicorn...but perhaps Michael could have a word with the Registrar on my behalf.

In 2015, Michael Morpurgo decided to donate his literary archive to Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books, which is based here in Newcastle. Commenting on the gift, Kate Edwards, Chief Executive of Seven Stories, observed that "this archive will be treasured, studied, showcased and enjoyed, for many generations to come..." And that is exactly what is happening. Seven Stories has developed a major exhibition which explores and celebrates Michael's life and work. It's absolutely wonderful, but I'm

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afraid you've just missed it as it's about to go off on a national tour. The exhibition was supported by a Knowledge Transfer Partnership between Seven Stories and Newcastle University's School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics. This innovative partnership, the first of its kind to involve a School of English, was recently awarded a Times Higher Education Leadership and Management Award for best Knowledge Exchange/Transfer Initiative of the Year.

Michael Morpurgo is perhaps best known for his novel, *War Horse*, about a farm horse called Joey who is requisitioned for the cavalry in the First World War. The book narrowly missed out on the Whitbread Prize, but its fortune was transformed when the National Theatre adapted it as a play, which proved to be a huge critical success. It has subsequently been adapted for the screen by Steven Spielberg. Although he has written many other highly successful books, *War Horse* remains a particular favourite of Michael's wife, Clare.

David Almond, who is himself a noted author of children's books, and another of our honorary graduates, describes Michael Morpurgo as a "cultural hero", adding "He really does believe that books and storytelling nourish, entertain, inform and inspire children, and form the beating heart of our culture. He is a true activist in the quest to create a better world." There is one project, dear to the hearts of both Michael and Clare, which clearly demonstrates their practical commitment to that laudable quest. In 1976, they set up a charity, Farms for City Children to enrich the lives of inner city children by giving them the opportunity to spend a week living and working on a country farm. The original farm has now expanded to three, and over the last forty one years, almost one hundred thousand city children have benefitted from the scheme. Dr Tessa Stone, Chief Executive for Farms for City Children, speaks warmly of his enduring commitment to this project.

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“Michael is a tireless fundraiser for us. Despite a diary that is booked months, and even years, in advance he always manages to fit in a couple of fundraising performances in our honour... he describes Farms for City Children as his ‘best work’, and that really shines through. Finally, he also happens to be the loveliest man – funny, thoughtful, challenging, and deeply caring about us and our work. You always come away from any interaction with Michael feeling better about the world.”

Throughout his career, Michael Morpurgo has worked with distinguished and talented illustrators, none more so than Michael Foreman, with whom he has collaborated on numerous occasions. When I asked Clare Morpurgo what she thought was the key to their rapport, she observed that, apart from the fact only one of them supported Chelsea Football Club, they had so much in common, they were almost like brothers. Reflecting on the same question, Michael Foreman told me that:

“When I get a brand new story from Michael Morpurgo, I feel lucky. He not only writes good stories, the stories are full of pictures I want to draw... He tackles BIG subjects with Hope and Love always. But what I think is special about Michael is not just that he is a wonderful writer, he is a great story teller... His books are like listening to a good friend telling you an amazing, moving story. The stories come not just from the imagination of a great writer, they come from the heart of a good man.”

Mr Chancellor, for his outstanding achievements as storywriter, and his passionate and practical commitment to the rights and needs of children, I present to you Mr Michael Morpurgo for the award of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

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